BUILDING BRIDGES

How to Start Your Own Building Bridges Program

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1. Be clear on what your mission/purpose is. You need to know what problem you're trying to solve what need you're seeking to address, in order to be able to persuade others to get involved. Our goals have been to provide opportunities for professional educators and others connected with local schools (1) to learn about business history and philosophy, market conditions, working conditions, job opportunities, expectations of new employees, and employee hiring procedures and criteria; and (2) to reflect on how this information can be used to change school programs so that they better prepare students for entering the workplace.

2. Identify a sponsoring organization(s), which shares an interest in your mission. This could be a local/regional Chamber of Commerce, school district or school-business partnership program. A well-known sponsoring group can provide legitimacy for your effort, access to people whose help you need in carrying out your program, staff support, a meeting place, printing and mailing, and other program support.

3. Find people who want to get involved. Volunteers are needed to serve in a steering committee, recruit business and education participants, facilitate program groups, do presentations about the program, and other tasks. Volunteers might include business people (especially those involved in employee hiring and staff training), coordinators of school-to-work programs, school administrators, teachers and university/college faculty.

4. Decide on a school participant model. Our program has used two models. The original program sought out high school teachers, guidance counselors and administrators as participants, from any school within reasonable traveling distance. In subsequent years, more middle school and even some elementary school teachers have also participated. We've also run the program twice for teams from one or two school districts. These district teams, in addition to the school professionals listed

above, have included non-professional staff, school board members, high school students, parents and local business people.

5. Plan a schedule of visits. Our program has included visits to 7-9 business and up to 2 educational institutions that are engaged in creative school-to-work programs, plus a wrap-up session. The wrap-up session is devoted to discussion of what participants of learned and follow-up actions they could take based on what they have learned. Our program is run 3-6pm on ten consecutive weeks, excluding any school holidays, in either the fall (mid-September to mid-November) or spring (mid-February to early May). There's no magic number of sessions, however. One of our team programs ran for 5 sessions, rather than the usual 10 sessions.

6. Arrange for participating educators to receive recognition for their articipation as part of their on-going professional development. In Maine, educators can receive continuing education units (CEUs) through the University of Maine (Orono) for participation in this program. Another possibility would be to present certificates of participation to educators at the end of the program, which they could then include, in a professional portfolio.

7. Allocate responsibilities for program implementation. A coordinator (for our program, this has always been a staff person at the Bangor Region Chamber of Commerce) is needed to recruit business and education participants, register education participants and send out a mailing to both business and education participants. The mailings include a cover letter, lists of the business and education participants, a schedule of visits and directions to the businesses. A group facilitator(s) (for us, rotated among members of the planning committee) is needed to contact business participants and discuss what to include in their presentations, make announcements, apply for CEUs (see #4) and take attendance for that purpose, distribute and collect weekly feedback forms and pre-/post-program questionnaires (see #10), and send thank you letters after each session to the business participants (see #8).

8. Recruit businesses and business participants. This can best be done through a sponsoring organization of which local businesses are members, such as a chamber of commerce. Someone, usually a manager involved in hiring and staff training, needs to serve as a business participant to coordinate arrangements for the visit. Explain to such a person (orally and in writing) what typically happens during a business site visit (panel presentation about business history, philosophy, market conditions, job opportunities, hiring processes and hiring criteria; tour of business facility; and question and answer session) and who is involved (managers at various levels, and workers in various capacities, including new employees). Once businesses agree to participate, a program schedule must be drawn up. If you include educational institutions with strong school-to-work programs as session sites, then the procedure for recruiting those sites is much the same as for businesses. Our school-to-work sites have included vocational-technical schools, a job corps center, and a school that had successfully implemented a Tech Prep program.

9. Recruit school participants. For the original program, this has been done through a flier mailed to principals of all schools within a reasonable driving distance (about 1/2 hour), which the principals are asked to announce at faculty meetings and post in the teachers' room. (In our experience, fliers to superintendents have seemed ineffective, as they often don't reach school personnel.) For the district team program, we have worked through a staff person in the district, such as a school-to-work program coordinator or a curriculum coordinator, who has made announcements at various meetings and sent their own fliers around to each of the schools. Publicity in local newspapers and in organizational newsletters has also been helpful, particularly in the beginning. Word-of-mouth from former program participants has been tremendously helpful since the program has been implemented. Fliers should be distributed in mid-August for a fall program, and in early December (immediately after Thanksgiving) for a spring program.

10. Decide how and who will evaluate the program. Our program has used two forms of evaluation: (1) a pre-program and post-program questionnaire administered as a research project by a university faculty member; and (2) weekly feedback forms. School participants fill out both questionnaires and feedback forms. Information from the feedback forms from each business visit is reported back to the business participant who coordinated that visit. A summary of results from the questionnaires is given to steering committee members, business participants and school participants once a group has completed the program and the data is analyzed. These forms of evaluation have been helpful in fine-tuning the program as we have continued it, and also as data for presentations to various groups.